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SUBJECT: USG GUIDANCE AND BACKGROUND REGARDING THE
PROCESS OF AFGHANISTAN'S PREPARATIONS FOR THE AUGUST
20 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

11. Summary: This cable provides suggested guidance and background for USG discussions on the 2009 Afghan presidential and provincial council elections in advance of the August 20 polling day. The guidance applies to U.S., Afghan, and international audiences. Paragraphs 2-4 outline the USG elections objectives and context. Paragraph 5 is a suggested senior U.S. official statement. Paragraphs 6-11 outline USG guidance. Paragraphs 12-20 outline as-needed press guidance. We shared and received comments from ISAF, UNAMA, Canada, and the UK. We copied it to the EU Observer Mission for their information.

Overarching USG Elections Objectives and Context

12. The USG is pursuing four objectives related to the Afghan Elections: (1) Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC) leads preparations and conducts secure, credible, and inclusive presidential and provincial council elections on August 20, 2009; (2) the people of Afghanistan understand their rights, support the elections, register to, and exercise their right to vote; (3) The United States and international partners, working through the United Nations and ISAF, actively contribute to strengthening the capacity of Afghan institutions and mechanisms required to protect the credibility, security, and inclusivity of the elections to take place on August 20, 2009. This includes working toward a "level playing field" for all candidates; (4) the people of Afghanistan understand that the U.S. will remain impartial, neither opposing nor supporting any particular Afghan Presidential or Provincial Council candidate. The U.S. interest is that Afghans exercise their right to elect their own leadership.

13. In spite of the difficult security conditions, Afghans have shown a strong commitment to the elections taking place; 41 candidates initiated a campaign for the Presidency, more than 3200 candidates are seeking Provincial Council positions, and 17 million people throughout the country are registered to vote. The number of presidential candidates has decreased as candidates drop out of the race and endorse an opponent. (The current number is 40. One other has publically withdrawn, but not completed the formalities.) All public statements should reflect this situation.

14. In support of the objectives, the US has outlined efforts worth approximately \$260 million to support the Presidential and Provincial Council election efforts this year. The total breaks down as follows: The U.S. provided \$65 million to the UN Development Program (UNDP) for voter registration for Afghanistan's 2009 elections and another \$55 million in FY09 Economic Support Funds (ESF) to UNDP to support election costs. Through our traditional implementing partners, such as NGOs, we have committed an additional \$115 million for voter outreach, voter education, political party development, IEC security, and Afghan elections process capacity building and are in the process of approving nearly \$25 million for election observation and logistics.

Recommendation for a Senior U.S. Official Statement

¶5. Suggested text of a Senior U.S. official statement (on/about August 6)

In two weeks the polls open in Afghanistan's presidential elections, the first they have led and the first fully contested elections in their history. Significantly, after decades of violence, Afghans will choose their future government by the ballot. They have held substantive debates on issues of importance to all Afghans; they have investigated and punished allegations of misbehavior during the campaign; and they have, to the extent possible, provided for the security of the maximum number of voters in all parts of the country. The United States will work with the Afghan government, Coalition, ISAF, and International forces, the United Nations and the rest of the international community to ensure a credible, inclusive and secure election. We call on Afghan citizens to fulfill their democratic responsibility to choose their next government.

Public Guidelines

¶6. US Government elements must not project assessments ahead of time about the credibility, security, or inclusivity of the Afghan elections. As an Afghan-led election, Afghan institutions, including the Independent Election Commission (IEC), the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), and Electoral Media Commission (EMC), along with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are capable of, and responsible for, ensuring these elements. Only the IEC can officially announce results. The international community supports these Afghan institutions.

¶7. US Government must avoid predicting a winner of the presidential

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election. Only the IEC can announce results. It will formally do so after they have tallied the votes and adjudicated complaints; any premature "calling" of the election will prejudice this process. As President Obama outlined, "each nation gives life to democracy in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its own people. The United States does not support or oppose any particular Presidential or Provincial Council candidate. Instead, we support the right of the people of Afghanistan to choose their own leaders."

¶8. In the event of a severe security or political incident, such as the death of a candidate or attempt to change elections scheduling or framework before the election, any comments should focus on the obligation of the Afghan government and institutions to follow the Constitution and laws. The death of a candidate before the election does not invalidate the election. These topics should not generally be discussed openly as possibilities or likelihoods.

¶9. Embassy believes the senior US official statement (Para 5) should be released on August 6, two weeks before voting, for maximum effect in Afghanistan and elsewhere. As-needed press guidance on issues of irregularity in preparations or security follows, and will be updated on a weekly basis.

¶10. Embassy expects NGOs to complete and publicly release approximately four nationwide public opinion surveys and eight qualitative surveys from August 5 to August 15, 2009. These surveys, including expected horse race statistics obtained in July, will likely affect the overall campaign environment.

¶11. IEC, UN, The Government Media and Information Center (GMIC), international donors, Coalition Forces, ISAF and Embassy representatives are working on a coordinated crisis communication plan that outlines talking points for irregular elections issues, such as elections related theft or attacks. Embassy will forward this information with appropriate elaboration NLT August 10.

As-needed press guidance:

¶12. Who is leading the election effort? Are they doing a good job?

A: Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission is, for the first time, leading the administration of the coming elections, the first truly contested election in Afghan history. Are they doing a good job? Yes, they are doing a good job under very difficult conditions. It is a tough job to hold an election in wartime. The success of voter registration, the ability of the IEC to make their supply timelines, and limited violence related to the election demonstrate significant progress. In addition to the IEC, all of the Afghan institutions involved are pulling their share. The Afghan Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense, and National Directorate of Security (NDS) are working countrywide, coordinating effectively across their offices and with the international community, ISAF, and Coalition forces to plan for the security challenges faced. Only the IEC can announce official results. Significantly, the elections represent a mechanism to support a peaceful transition or evolution of power in the country. This is a distinct change from Afghanistan's recent history where violence was the only means. As an impartial actor, the international community's role has been to offer resources and expertise to help the IEC implement secure, credible, and inclusive elections and build the capacity of Afghan institutions, including the ANSF. Instrumental to ensuring IEC impartiality, the Afghan and International media, United Nations, and the international community will monitor the IEC's activities to ensure their impartiality.

¶13. How many polling sites are there - aren't there issues about closing sites and disenfranchising Pashtun voters?

A: The last Presidential election, organized by the International Community, used only 4807 polling centers. The number of centers this time far exceeds those open in 2004.

The IEC will open over [5000 - number will grow as decisions are made] polling centers, covering all 34 provinces, and is on schedule with supplying these centers with election materials. The IEC has not yet determined the final number of polling centers because they continue to consider expansion to additional locations. In some cases, the IEC is still reviewing the exact location of polling centers because of technical or nearby security considerations. The location and final number of the polling centers will be publicized in early August when the preparations are finalized, but still early enough to inform voters and supply the centers successfully.

Security

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¶14. Will the elections take place? There is a war going on, especially in the South.

A: We expect, and all indications are the elections will take place as scheduled on August 20, 2009. ANSF, ISAF, International and Coalition Forces, and the IEC have cooperated and planned extensively to help ensure the Afghan government can implement effective measures to provide safety for the Afghan voters. ANSF and ISAF have assessed polling center locations and held coordinated - inter-Afghan agency- local and nationwide exercises with ISAF to ensure readiness for Election Day.

Any attacks on the elections process is an attack on the Afghan people. Ongoing violence caused by enemies of peace is a concern for everyone. In addition to, and in cooperation with ANSF security plans, many local leaders have announced intentions to safeguard their community and the people's right to vote.

Credibility

¶15. What measures are in place to prevent or reduce fraud?

A: The credibility of the Afghan elections will be determined by the Afghan leaders and the people who share the responsibility of protecting their rights and safeguarding the process. The IEC is planning to meet and overcome any election obstacles, such as misplaced or damaged ballots, to ensure the rights of all Afghans are respected.

¶16. Exactly what can the Afghan authorities do?

A: The IEC has planned numerous measures to deter and detect fraud in the time leading to, during and following the election. These measures include the use of indelible ink, local counting and publication of ballots cast, redundant tracking of results, random nationwide audits of voting results to detect irregularities, accreditation of candidate agents, and thousands of domestic and international observers. However, no country is immune from attempts at election fraud and no electoral safeguard is foolproof. The goal is to have structures and procedures in place to deter and minimize such fraud.

¶17. Aren't the enforcement mechanisms toothless?

A: The Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) continues to investigate complaints against the process and about candidates. There are many rumors and accusations of potential wrong doing. The ECC is working within its authorities and legal provisions to investigate and adjudicate these issues. Since initiating operations, the ECC has imposed sanctions for violations of electoral laws, including fines and disqualification of candidates. In this adjudication process, the sanctioned parties are named publicly which provides further deterrence. The ECC is expanding its staff and nationwide presence. Technical experts are working with the ECC to improve its adjudication speed, and it continues to operate in a lawful and balanced manner. The ECC is the only entity with the authority to review and adjudicate electoral violations and all possible cases should be documented and passed to the ECC for investigation. Individuals can also raise a complaint and urge the ECC to initiate an investigation into it on its own. It's important to remember the complaints must be verifiable. Understandably, the ECC can not take action on accusation alone.

¶18. What about media bias in favor of President Karzai?

A: It is a fact that the sitting president enjoys important media advantages which accrue to incumbents in all electoral systems. With that said, all Presidential candidates in Afghanistan have had or will have the opportunity to appear in the media through radio, TV or print interviews, roundtables, and discussions. In addition to private and state media efforts to this goal, the Electoral Media Commission (EMC) is conducting a sponsored advertising program, which ensures that Presidential candidates and their views are aired before radio and TV audiences countrywide. The EMC also actively monitors nationwide print, radio, and TV media broadcasts and has been diligent in publishing its findings, without fear or favor, and working within its authority to mitigate disparities. In the publication of its weekly media monitoring analysis, the EMC both criticizes and commends publically Afghan media sources for the equity of its coverage. The EMC analysis is subsequently adopted by Afghan and international media representatives and used in further scrutiny of the process. Independent media, both Afghan and international, are instrumental in realizing the credibility of the elections. By documenting and reporting on issues, scrutinizing rumors, and reporting accurately they also support the process. Afghan and international media representatives plan to cover the elections countrywide.

Inclusivity

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¶19. President Karzai and others say that the Pashtun vote will be suppressed, which could affect the credibility and outcome of the vote. Is this true?

A: There are many, many more polling centers this year than the 4,800 of the first Afghan Presidential election in 2004. From October 2008-February 2009, Afghans supported the process of voter registration and registered to vote country wide with little associated violence. Afghans, regardless of ethnicity, will have the opportunity to vote if they choose to do so. Afghan leaders at all levels, including presidential candidates, have the obligation to ensure their country men and women have the opportunity to vote. The inclusivity and credibility of the poll will rely on Afghan leaders' character and honesty, as it does in

all countries.

¶20. What is the other election about?

Thousands of Provincial Council candidates are also campaigning for office to help manage the local affairs of each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. The Afghan people must decide who is best qualified for the positions. With nearly 3,200 candidates, including 328 women, vying for 420 seats, they have never before had such a wide choice.
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